Online Participation in a Community Context: Civic Engagement and Connections to Local Communication Resources

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The City of Alhambra

Location:
A city in L.A. County, 8 miles east of downtown

Population:
83,000 Residents

Diversity:
10% Anglo, 34% Latino, 53% Asian

Media:
Little local coverage, no common local news outlet

Citizenship:
Low levels of civic engagement
A research-driven, community-based local news website launched in September 2010
Project Evaluation Design

- A two-wave, tri-lingual survey of Alhambra residents
- Focus groups with community contributors, residents, businesses
- Interviews with representatives of local organizations
- Media monitoring, content analysis, tracking shifts in story topics
- Tracking of content reproduced in other media outlets
- Monitoring of visitors’ comments on the website
- Web analytics: Website, Facebook & Twitter
- Testimonials: from contributors, residents, local officials
Bridging the Storytelling Networks

Ethnic Chinese Storytelling Network

- Residents
- Community Orgs
- Geo-Ethnic Media

Latino Storytelling Network

- Residents
- Community Orgs
- Geo-Ethnic Media

Anglo Storytelling Network

- Residents
- Community Orgs
- Geo-Ethnic Media
Storytelling Networks and Civic Engagement

- Community & Non-Profit Organizations
- Geo-Ethnic Media
- Residents (Local Discussion)
- Online Participation
- Civic Engagement
- Intergroup Interactions
Community-Oriented Online Participation (COIP)

Have you used the Internet to:

- Read news stories about your neighborhood
- Find information about your neighborhood
- Communicate with other residents of the area
- Discuss local issues online
- Post comments about the community
- Receive e-mails from political orgs or neighborhood associations
2010 Survey in Alhambra

Sample & Procedures

- 405 respondents: 152 Chinese, 154 Latino, 99 Anglo
- 79% of the sample through RDD, 21% through postcards
- Interviews (English, Spanish, Chinese): average length 27 minutes
- Incentive: $20 supermarket certificate or donation to charity
- Response rate for the survey: 24%
- Sample skews older than census data; post-stratification weighing
Theoretical Model

- **Control Variables**
  - Age
  - Education
  - Income
  - Residential Tenure

- **Storytelling Network**
  - Connection to Geo-Ethnic Media
  - Connection to Local Organizations
  - Interpersonal Discussion

- **Intergroup Interactions**

- **Civic Participation**

- **Community-Oriented Online Participation**

Hypotheses:
- H1
- H2
- H3
- H4
- H5
- H6

Research Question (RQ): Civic Participation
Model Fit: $\chi^2 = 4.1, (p=.9) \text{ DF}=9 \text{ RMSEA}<0.01, \text{ NFI}=.99, \text{ GFI}=1$

R² = .38

R² = .21

R² = .37
### Direct, Indirect and Total Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Direct effect on COIP</th>
<th>Direct effect on Civic Participation</th>
<th>Direct Effect Intergroup Interaction</th>
<th>Indirect Effect on Civic Participation</th>
<th>Total Effect on Civic Participation</th>
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<td>.20 **</td>
<td>.03 *</td>
<td>.19 **</td>
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<td>.15 **</td>
<td>.07 **</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>.11 *</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05  **p < .01
Local media and organizations play little to no role in promoting civic engagement.

The main factor driving both online and offline participation in the community is interpersonal discussion.

Online participation predicts civic engagement directly – and indirectly through intergroup interaction.

Individuals who communicate across ethnic barriers are more likely to be civically engaged.

Social groups that are already disconnected from social civic practices may remain isolated from online participation too.
Thank You!

www.alhambrasource.org
www.metamorph.org